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The WHISTLING MOTHER

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YOUR BOY, IF HE IS THE RIGHT KIND OF A BOY, HAS WORK TO DO THROUGH A LONG LIFE. NOTHING WILL HAPPEN TO HIM. "A MAN IS IMMORTAL TILL HIS WORK IS DONE." THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS TO THIS RULE, AS TO ALL OTHERS, BUT THIS IS STILL THE RULE.

THE WHISTLING MOTHER

BY

GRACE S. RICHMOND

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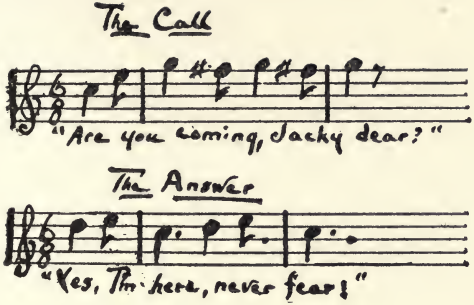
THE WHISTLING MOTHER



THE WHISTLING MOTHER

I HAVE the greatest mother on earth. I can't call her a "little mother," for she's five feet six inches tall, and weighs just exactly what she ought to according to the table of weights. If she were a trifle less active she might put on too much flesh, but she'll never keep still long enough for that. I always enjoy having her along on any kind of an outing, for she's game for just anything, and

awfully good company, too. In fact, she seems more like a vigorous girl than anything I can compare her with. And I think her sons are mighty lucky chaps—especially just now that the war game's on.

Yes, that's a picture of Mother; neat little holder for it, isn't it? Yes, I know; she does look interesting, doesn't she? She's an awfully good shot, and drives her own car, and rides like a Cossack, and does a lot of other things—not to mention making home—well—what it is. I suppose I'm rather braggy about her, but I tell you I feel that way just now, and I'm going to tell you why. . . . She's pretty, too, don't you think so? I thought you would.

The thing that started me off was Hoofy Gilbert coming across the dorm hall with a letter in his hand. We called him Hoofy because he hated walking so, and always

drove his big yellow roadster from one class to another, even if it was only a thousand feet straight across the campus to the next lecture. Well, Hoofy came in that day—it was just before the Easter vacation—looking as if he were down and out for fair. It turned out he'd written home about enlisting, and he'd got back a letter from his mother, all sobs. He didn't know what to do about it. You see the fellows were all writing home, and trying to break it gently that when they got there they'd have to put it up to the family to say "Go, and God bless you!" But it was looking pretty dubious for some of my special friends. Their mothers were all right, an awfully nice sort, of course, but when it came to telling Bob and Sam and Hector to enlist—they just simply couldn't do it.

Hoofy said he'd got to enlist, in spite of his mother. He knew it was his duty, but he'd rather be shot than go home and go through the farewells. He knew his mother would be sick in bed about it, and she'd cling round his neck and cry on his shoulder, and he'd have to loosen her arms and go off leaving her feeling like that. And his father would look grave and tell him not to mind, that his mother wasn't well, and that she couldn't help it—and Hoofy really didn't think she could, being made that way. Just the same, he dreaded going home to say good-bye—dreaded it so much he felt like flunking it and wiring he couldn't come.

I told him he mustn't do that—that his mother would never forgive him, and that he'd have to put on a stiff upper lip and go through with it. And Hoofy owned that

that was the thing he was really afraid of —that his upper lip wouldn't keep stiff but would wobble, in spite of him. And of course a breakdown on his own part would be the worst possible thing that could happen to him. No potential soldier wants to feel his upper lip unreliable, no matter what happens. It's likely to make him flinch in a critical moment, when flinching won't do.

I was looking up at a picture of Mother on the wall over my desk as I advised him to go home, and he asked me suddenly what *my* mother wrote back when I told her. I hated to tell him, but he pushed me about it, so I finally got out her letter and read him the last paragraph—but one. Of course the last one I wouldn't have read to anybody.

"It's all right, Son, and we're proud as

Punch of you, that you want to be not only in America's '*First Hundred Thousand*,' but in her '*First Ten Thousand*.' We know it will stiffen your spine considerably to hear that your family are behind you. Well, we are—just ranks and rows of us, with our heads up and the colours waving. Even Grandfather and Grandmother are as gallant as veterans about it. So go ahead—but come home first, if you can. You needn't fear we shall make it hard for you—not we. We may offer you a good deal of jelly, in our enthusiasm for you, but you could always stand a good deal of jelly, you know, so there's no danger of our making a jelly-fish of you—which wouldn't do, in the circumstances. That's rather a poor joke, but I'll try to make a better one for you to laugh at when you come. When

shall we expect you? No—we won't have the village band out, and will try not to look as if we had a hero in our midst, but we shall be awfully glad to see Jack just the same."

When I looked up after reading this, Hoofy looked like a small boy who's been staring in a shop-window at a fire-engine he can't have. He heaved a big sigh, and said: "Well, I wish my mother'd take it that way," and went out, banging the door after him. And I got up and went over and took Mother down and looked at her, and said to her: "You game little sport, you—you'd put the spine into a jelly-fish any time. And I wouldn't miss going home to hug you for good-bye if I knew the first round of shot would get me as a result."

So then I packed up, and went around

and saw the dean, who assured me that, even though I didn't stay to finish my Junior year, I'd keep my place and get my dip, no matter how long the war lasted. Then he looked over his spectacles at me, and said it was a good thing I was so tall and slim—it would be a crack marksman who could get me, or even tell me from a sapling at five hundred yards; and we grinned at each other and shook hands. Good old Hamerton—I hope he'll be there when I get back. Then I wired Mother and took the train for home. . . . I don't know why I always write and wire Mother instead of Father, for I think a lot of my dad. But he's pretty busy at the office, and not much of a letter-writer, except by way of a stenographer. Mother always gives me his messages in her letters, and when I get home

he and I talk up to date, and then Mother and I go on writing again.

Just Mother met me at the train—the girls were in school, and Dad not yet home from the office. My kid brother hadn't been told, for fear he'd cut school altogether. Mother had the roadster—and it was shining like a brass band. She looked just as she always does—tailored out of sight, little close hat over her smooth black hair, and black eyes shining through a trim little veil that keeps all snug. No loose ends about Mother, I can tell you, from the top of her stunning little hat to the toes of her jolly little Oxfords over silk stockings that would get anybody. Even her motoring gloves are "kept up," as we say of a car. The sight of her, smiling that absolutely gorgeous smile that shows her splendid

white teeth, made me mighty glad I'd come home.

Act as if I'd come to say good-bye, and could stay only twenty-four hours? I should say she didn't. Kissed me, with her hand on my shoulder—glove off—and then said: "Want to spin round the Circle, Jack, before we go home? By that time they'll all be there."

"Sure," I said, grinning at the car. We're not rich, and I don't sport a car to go to lectures with, like Hoofy and a lot of other fellows, so ours always looks darned good to me when I get home. Mother understands how I'm crazy to drive the minute I can get my hands on the wheel, so without an invitation I put her into the seat beside me and took the driver's place myself. She settled down, same as she always does, and remarked:

"It's always so good to have you drive. I never shall get quite the form you have."

Which wasn't true a bit, for she drives just as well as I do—she ought to, I taught her. But she has an awfully clever little trick of making a fellow feel good, and I like it—who wouldn't? A lot of mothers never lose an opportunity to take a son down a bit—though I don't suppose one would whose son had come to say good-bye. That same sort are the ones to weep on their boys' shoulders, though, I've noticed.

We started off at a good clip, and right away Mother said:

"Now, tell me all about it," exactly as if I'd just won an intercollegiate, or something like that.

So I told it all to her, and was glad of

the chance. I hadn't had time to write much about it, but I could talk fast enough, and I did; and she listened—well, she listened just exactly as another fellow would. I mean—you didn't have to colour the thing, or shave off anything, or fix up any dope to ease it for her, because you knew she wanted it straight. So, naturally, you gave it to her straight—which is much the best way, if people only realized it—for it's all got to come out in the end. And when I was through, what do you suppose she said? Just about the last thing you'd expect any mother to say:

"It's all perfectly great, and I don't wonder you want to go. Why, if you didn't want to go, Jack, I should feel that I'd been the wrong sort of mother."

Now, honestly, do you blame me? I looked down at her—I'm a good deal

taller than she is—and for a minute I wanted to get down in front of her among the gear-shifts and put my head in her lap. But of course I didn't do anything so idiotic as that. I just laughed and said: "Not you,"—and put out my hand and squeezed hers—she'd left off her motoring gloves. And she squeezed back, and looked up at me with those black eyes of hers—and that was all there was of it, and we were off again on details, with no scene to remember. A fellow doesn't like scenes.

Well, then we got back to the house, and everybody was there—except Dad, and he came soon. There were my two young sisters, Sally and Sue; and my kid brother, Jimmy—mad as fury because he hadn't been told; and Grandfather and Grandmother. Everybody was all smiles,

and nobody even suggested that the time was short—which it blamed was. Dad came in and shook my hand off, and we settled down to talk.

Pretty soon there was dinner, a perfectly ripping dinner, with everything I like—including tons of jelly, at sight of which I grinned at Mother and she grinned back—if you can call her gorgeous smile a grin. After dinner the lights were put on and we had some music, as we always do when I'm home—little family orchestra with two fiddles, a flute, my mandolin, and the piano, and I noticed we didn't play any but the jolliest sort of things. Then Dad and I sat down again on the big couch in front of the fireplace to smoke and talk, with the kids hanging round till long past their bed-time. I went up with Jimmy, my twelve-year-old

brother, when at last he was ordered off to bed, and told him a lot of yarns and made him laugh like everything—which was rather a triumph, for I'd been afraid his eyes were a bit bleary.

When I came back everybody had cleared out except Mother. My heart came up in my throat for a minute, she looked so pretty and young and regularly splendid, there by the fire. I said to myself: "I don't believe I can stand a heart-to-heart talk—and not break. But I've got to go through with it—and I will, if it takes a leg!"

Well—I've always called her my whistling mother. It's a queer title, but it's hers in a peculiar way. She always could whistle like a blackbird. She never did it for exhibition; I don't mean that—I should say not—but she did do it for calls

to her family, in the woods or in the house when there were no guests about; and she often whistled softly over her work. Perhaps you don't think that's a womanly thing to do—but it's better, from my point of view—it's sporting. For Mother's got something of a temper—you'd know anybody with so much grit must have a temper—and lots of times when she wanted to be angry, suddenly she'd break out in a regular rag-time whistle, and then laugh, and everything would be all right again.

She and I had a special call of our own, one she'd made up. I'd know it anywhere in the world. It was a pretty thing—just a bar or two, but rather unusual. Well, as I came in the door that night she looked round and gave that whistle. I thought for a minute I was gone—but I bucked up

all right and answered it. And that—yes, it was actually the only minute she gave me that evening that tried my pluck. She began to talk in the nicest, most matter-of-fact way in the world. Not too awfully cheerful, you know, overdoing it, but just as if I'd come home for the summer vacation, and there was all the time anybody needed to talk things over. And she kept that up. The only thing that marked the difference was that her hand was in mine all the time we sat there—but that was nothing new, either, and didn't break me up at all. Maybe you could imagine how grateful I was to her. Good Lord—what if I'd had to face a mother like Hoofy Gilbert's! What a chance to put a fellow on the grill and keep him there—his last evening at home! No wonder Hoofy had dreaded to go.

She kissed me good-night, when we broke up, in just exactly the old way—no extras. Oh, maybe I did put a little more muscle than usual into the hug I gave her —Mother's great to hug, just exactly like a girl—but that was all. We parted with a laugh. Afterward, when I was in bed, with the firelight still flickering on the little hearth in my old room, she came in, in some kind of a loose, rosy sort of silk thing, and her long black hair in two braids, and stooped down and kissed me, and patted my shoulder, and went out again without saying a word. . . . Maybe I didn't turn over then for a minute, and bury my head in my pillow and have it out a bit. But that didn't count, because nobody saw.

Next morning was just the same; and we had the greatest sort of a breakfast—

everything tasting bully, the way it does at home, you know. Then I went down to the office with Dad, and saw the boys, who all came round and gave me the glad hand, and wished me luck. Everybody I met on the street wished me that, except an old lady or two, who sighed over me—but I didn't mind them, they just made me want to laugh. Then home, and lunch, with Mother looking ripping in the jolliest sort of a frock. And we had lots of fun over a letter she'd had from some inquiring idiot, who wanted to know a lot of things she couldn't tell him; and she asked our advice, and of course we gave it, in chunks. In the afternoon she and I took another spin and, as I'd quite ceased to fear I couldn't see it through, it went off mighty well.

I was a little owly about dinner, though,

because soon afterward it would be train time. But I needn't have been. My family certainly is the gamest crowd I ever saw. Even Grandfather, who takes things rather seriously as a rule, told a couple of corking stories, and Grandmother laughed at them in a perfectly natural way, though I couldn't help suspecting her of bluffing. Of course, when it came to that, I knew they were all bluffing. But I tell you, a fellow wants a bluff at a time like that, and he isn't going to misunderstand it, either—not from my sort of people.

The time came at last when I had to go up to my room and get my stuff—and I knew what would happen then. Mother would come, too, and we'd say our real good-bye there. That's only fair to her—and to me, too, for I wouldn't miss it, even

though it's the real crisis in every going away. But—that night—well. . . .

Of course, you know, the room's full of my junk—things I've had since I was a little chap, all the way up, to things I had in my Freshman year and thought were awfully sporty—and then discarded and brought home to keep in remembrance of my foolish youth. I'm pretty fond of that old room. I don't need to explain that much, probably. Any fellow would know.

I took one look around before Mother came—I thought one would be about all that would be good for me. The fire was burning rather brightly on the hearth, but I'd put out the other lights. . . . Then Mother came in.

If I hadn't caught a glimpse of her hands I shouldn't have known, but I did

happen to see them as she came in. They were clinched tight at her sides, just the way I've often clinched mine before I went into a game on which a good deal depended. But the next minute her arms were round my neck in the old way, and she was holding me so tight I could hardly breathe—and I don't believe she could breathe much, either, for I was giving her back every bit of that, with some to spare. I have an idea she was saying, inside, "I won't—I *won't*"—just the same way I was. And she didn't—and I didn't —though *not to* certainly pulled harder than anything I ever *didn't* do in my life!

She didn't keep me long. Just that one great hug, and something else that goes with it, and then *what* do you think she said? If I'd had a hat on I'd have taken it off to her at that moment. She looked up

into my face, and showed me hers, all smiling, and not a tear in her eyes, and said:

"*Jacky, you're a brick!*"

And then I just broke out into a great laugh of relief, and I shouted:

"*Mother, you're a whole brickyard!*"

And we went downstairs carrying my luggage between us, and the worst was over, and the thing I dreaded hadn't happened.

Perhaps you think she ought to have prayed over me, and given me a Bible, and a lot of good motherly advice. Don't you think it! The prayers had been spread over twenty-two years of my life, and the Bible was all marked up with her markings. As for the good advice—well—if she hadn't done her level best, long before that, to teach me to keep clean, and think

straight, and "hit the line hard"—it was too late to begin then. But she didn't have to begin then, because the thing was done, as well as any mother on earth could do it. And if you think that little thumb-marked book wasn't in my bag at that minute, you don't think right, that's all.

Dad said a few fatherly things to me before I went, like the all-round trump he is, and I was glad to have him. I could stand that all right. But I couldn't have borne anything from Mother—not then—and she knew it. How did she know? That's what gets me. But she did, the way she's always seemed to know things without being told. She's that sort, you see.

They all went down to the station with me, in the seven-passenger, with Dad driving. We didn't talk much on the

way. I tried not to see the familiar old streets. I hadn't told anybody what train I was going on, but some of my old friends found out and came down just the same, and were there in a bunch to send me off. They hurried up to us, and shook hands and jollied me, and everything was lively. When the train came in we all went together to it, and then I saw the boys stand back and look at Mother. I don't know what they expected to see, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't what they did see.

It was evening, but instead of putting on an awfully stunning fur-bordered coat over the things she'd worn to dinner, as she usually does when she goes out in the car at night, Mother'd taken the trouble to go back to the tailored suit and little close hat she wears in the street and for

driving. She knows I like her best that way—and I certainly did that night. I can't tell you why, except that the things we've always done together have been mostly in street-and-sports clothes—tramping and motoring and golfing—and so forth. She always seems more like a sort of good chum dressed like that than when she puts on trailers and silky things—though, my word! if you don't think she's a peach in evening dress you never saw her. Her neck and shoulders—but that's neither here nor there just now. The thing I'm telling is that she'd gone back to the clothes that make her look like a jolly girl, and I knew she'd done it so I could remember her that way.

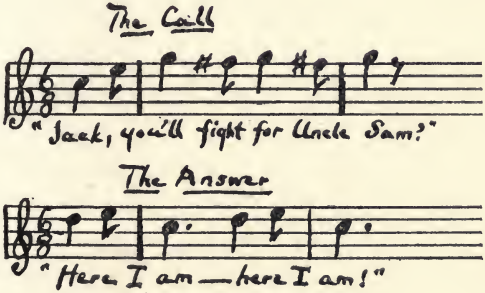
It wasn't so hard then to go. It was all over in a minute. Nobody hung round my neck. Even when it came to Mother,

whom of course I always leave till the last, she just gave me one good kiss, with her hands on my shoulders, and then I jumped on board. The train didn't linger long, for which I was mighty glad. When it pulled out, and I looked back at them all standing there—the whole bunch of them —suddenly I couldn't see them awfully well. But I gave a big wink that cleared my eyes, and saw that Mother was smiling, just as she always does, exactly as if I'd been going back to prep-school after my first vacation home. It wasn't a teary smile, either—it was her very best. . . . I see it now, sometimes, when I'm just dropping off to sleep.

I've thought about that send-off a lot since I got away. I've realized since, more than I did then, that it must have taken just sheer pluck on all their parts to

see it through as they did. Of course, my young sisters couldn't understand all it meant, but my kid brother's read a heap, as I easily found out when we talked about it, and I know he had to do a few swallowings of the throat on the side not to show how he felt more than he did. As for Grandfather and Grandmother, they went through the Civil War, and they knew, better than any of us, what might be ahead. Dad—well—Dad has wonderful control of himself always, and I should be surprised if I saw his heart on his sleeve at any time, yet I knew perfectly that he felt the whole thing tremendously. He was banking on doing his bit in the Home Defence League, and the Red Cross, and everywhere else he could get his hand in, and I could tell well enough that he was aching to be in active service.

But after all, it's the mothers, I think, who do the biggest giving when their sons go to war. I suspect it's what they put into their sons that stands for the real stuff in the crisis. I don't think there are many weak mothers, like Hoofy Gilbert's, even among the ones who are invalids. But I wish more of them understood what it is to a fellow to have his mother hold her head up!



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